

Civil - Military Interaction: Recognising Tensions, Identifying Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the changing landscape of humanitarian assistance and the challenges it poses for civil-military interaction. It identifies difficulties and opportunities for cooperation between the two sets of actors in the context of conflict-affected countries, complex humanitarian emergencies, stabilisation missions, and the protection of civilians. It points to the increasing diversity of actors in both the humanitarian and military sectors operating in these sorts of environments and identifies possible arenas for dialogue, communication and cooperation with the use of country case studies.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of humanitarian assistance is changing. More complex emergencies are seeing civilian and military actors, who, in the past, have – with the exception of the ICRC - only superficially interacted with one another, increasingly finding themselves operating in the same space. Further, the diversity and number of actors from both sectors has greatly increased over the last 20 years. Military actors now include national armies, international forces, combined regional forces, police and private security firms, while civilian actors can refer to large scale humanitarian groups who have operated in the contexts for many years, governmental organisations, right down to small NGOs with just a handful of employees. The challenges this poses are many; these actors have different analyses of the context in which they are operating, use different language and have different cultures and organisational set-ups. This is true both within and between the two groups of actors. More importantly, there is a fundamental difference between humanitarian and military motivations, priorities and goals: Often the political motivations of military forces do not sit easily alongside the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

I want to acknowledge here that whilst these relationships are the most challenging in situations of armed conflict - particularly where militaries are also belligerents – there are still difficulties to civil-military interaction where natural disasters occur in areas facing ongoing conflict, like in Pakistan, or suffering severe instability and insecurity, as in the case of Haiti.

The continuing politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian assistance is the overarching challenge to effective co-ordination between civil and military actors, and although the relationship has often been unconstructive, there are opportunities for dialogue and at times also cooperation. While the consequences of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992 led many to call for more distinction between the roles of humanitarian and military actors, the debate on civil-military relations has largely been shaped by events in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there are certainly lessons we can learn from these examples. The most important thing to say is that the job of civil and military actors in these situations is not the same and nor should it be. Both have different roles to play and while cooperation is important, we should remain true to our own expertise. Current guidelines and training for humanitarians often do not adequately reflect the complex reality of these relationships; for instance while aid organisations are not accustomed to the military being first responders in natural disasters where this has been the case for example on Pakistan.

STABILISATION

It wasn't until the post 9/11 era that the concept of stabilisation began to influence military doctrine and foreign aid. At this point a number of countries created departments where military and civilian actors worked closely together in a 'whole of government' approach when dealing with so-called fragile states. Interventions in the name of stabilisation have since become the norm in conflict-affected countries and have seen the expansion of the military into areas beyond their traditional mandates and areas of expertise.

While there is no reason to reject the goal of stability, stabilisation itself is not without its problems. Ultimately military intervention does not promote the values of human rights or development, but has priorities shaped by governments. The tendency with stabilisation missions is towards prioritising national interests, securitization and control as much as, if not more than humanitarian needs. This is problematic for humanitarian actors for two reasons; it normalises the role of the military in these types of interventions and it seeks to use civilian assistance to achieve a political goal. Of course humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political and security objectives, but it may be compromised by these objectives in stabilisation missions. The military often separate the general population from insurgents seeking to identify 'good' and 'bad' with the aim of winning the 'hearts and minds' of the general population, an approach in opposition to the humanitarian principles of impartiality. That said; if humanitarian organisations do not engage on some level with military actors in these contexts, not least in order to raise awareness on obligations under IHL and ensuring that militaries understand the role of aid actors, they risk being marginalised from providing assistance altogether.

What is also problematic is stabilisation's lack of definitional clarity. Existing definitions are imprecise and often ignore the underlying ideological and power dynamics of stabilisation missions. The open-ended nature of the concept – that it can be short-term or long-term – allows for varying interpretations. While stabilisation represents a recognition that conflict is not easily resolved and that longer-term multidimensional strategies are needed if peace is to be achieved, it also assumes in a simplistic way that conflict and weak governance pose a threat to international peace and security and that conflicts are fuelled by dissatisfaction with the state and therefore improved service delivery and governance can stabilise conflict.

There is a far deeper theoretical argument here over whether interventions should be aimed at state-building at all. Afghanistan has shown us that long-term interventions without a clear exit strategy face incredible complexity and difficulty in practice. As a result critics have argued that stabilisation does not have a good track record in improving the lives of those on the ground, and has failed to deliver on its original promises. In fact, expenditure on stabilisation efforts has proven to be one of the least effective ways to spend aid.

Although the stabilisation missions in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be seen as success stories, the concept of stabilisation is probably there to stay in some form even if it will continue to be questioned given the experience so far. There will be divergence of opinion between civilians and the military on certain topics, but awareness and appreciation of the other's perspective is a crucial step in minimising misunderstandings. We should endeavour to harness civilian and military know-how and institutionalise the working relationship between the two.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The protection of civilians in complex emergencies is a common goal of both the military and humanitarians, and yet this is where the relationship between the two sets of actors can be the most difficult. There is little guidance for either the military or civilian actors on how they should interact in relation to the protections of civilians, which is problematic given the different conceptual understandings of protection among different actors and the increasingly multi-dimensional nature of UN peacekeeping and other international missions.

Where the UN has a mandate to protect civilians with the use of force, particularly where peacekeepers are a party to a conflict or are working alongside government forces thought to be violating human rights, co-operation becomes especially difficult – as demonstrated by the cases of DRC and South Sudan. Both situations have seen civilian populations not viewing intervening militaries as neutral because of their involvement with national security forces who themselves pose a threat to the population.

In addition, having a POC mandate does not automatically give the necessary guidance to military and civilian personnel of UN missions on how to operationalise the concept. As an example in 2009 the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) developed a POC strategy outlining the responsibilities of the missions in relation to security and attempting to strike a balance between the use of force when protecting civilians and the potential consequences of such use for the mission as a whole.

Maintaining a clear distinction will also facilitate humanitarian agencies' ability to negotiate with non-state armed actors. This is essential in environments where the perception of communities is a vital consideration in the effort to negotiate humanitarian access. Adding to the importance of maintaining distinction is the ability to establish contacts with non-state armed actors without the consequences of counter-terrorism measures looming over aid workers' heads. Such measures hamper humanitarian organisations in their ability to negotiate access and therefore in their ability to provide assistance and protection.

An additional challenge as seen in the case of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is the tension within certain UN mandates. On the one hand the mission is to consolidate the peace and support the Government of South Sudan and on the other hand to use all necessary means to carry out its protection mandate knowing that the biggest threat comes from the government it is mandated to support. Striking a balance between these opposed objectives was never going to be easy. Recent events in Juba however also show that UNMISS was able to provide a degree of physical protection to approximately 60,000 people by providing them shelter in its bases and compounds. Of course traditional humanitarian intervention does not seek to address the root cause of conflict or instability – rather to get assistance to those who face the consequences of it. Having said that, the military form an essential part of a mission where a state is fragile or facing armed conflict and DRC has demonstrated that having the ability to respond with force is sometimes necessary. MONUSCO's original focus was providing technical support to a poorly trained Congolese army, but this was not enough to adequately protect civilians under imminent threat of violence. This prompted the creation of an 'Intervention Brigade' with a specific mandate to neutralise armed groups using all necessary means.

Because of these tensions, the ICRC guidelines for humanitarians emphasise the importance of ensuring aid workers are familiar with the role and responsibility of UN-mandated peacekeeping forces and international militaries with relation to the protection of civilians, and with relation to the context in which they are operating. Despite ambitious mandates given to UN peacekeepers there are practical limitations of military protection. Quite often small UN peacekeeping forces operate in enormous countries with limited logistical means preventing them to operate effectively where it is needed. Strong mandates are important, but so is political attention addressing conflict causes rather than its effects, sadly that is very often lacking.

There are however some positive examples of interaction on civilian protection. In DRC, the relationship between civilian and military actors has become increasingly structured through the Senior Management Group for Protection where regular discussions between high-level military and civilian representatives take place to improve early warning systems, identify high risk communities and allocate tasks. In Afghanistan, the coordinated interaction between the UN Assistance Mission and the International Security Assistance Force is credited with influencing the development of tactical directives on minimising civilian casualties and the two are engaging on other issues such as arbitrary displacement.

Clearly then, as the ICRC guidelines suggest,¹ successful interaction should see humanitarian organisations proactively engaging with military groups to promote positive outcomes, establish relevant networks and lines of communication as early as possible. It is also important that aid workers constantly assess and reassess their relationships with military actors as the conflict context changes and evolves. Whilst working alongside each other with more coordination is important, it is vital not to blur each other's roles and responsibilities, especially not in the eyes of local communities.

AID WORKER SECURITY

In Afghanistan, military strategies have eroded the distinction between military and civilian actors in the eyes of the population which has contributed to negative perceptions of aid agencies.² The concepts of neutrality and impartiality are increasingly called into question in environments where agencies use armed escorts to gain access to difficult areas, and the short term gains of compromising these humanitarian principles will most likely jeopardise any long term benefits not just for the organisation in question, but the aid community more generally. Our research from Afghanistan demonstrated the importance of humanitarian workers consistently behaving according to humanitarian principles if they want to see them respected by others.³

For some humanitarians too much blurring of the lines between civilian and military roles is a common problem in these complex emergency situations. The contraction of humanitarian space has been characterised by violent attacks on aid workers, the numbers of which have doubled since 2003 and humanitarian engagement with the military risks complicity in inappropriate or ineffective assistance. There is however a noticeable absence of practical evidence-based analysis of these issues in the humanitarian literature. Clearly, maintaining the civil-military distinction is a major challenge especially in high-intensity conflicts but nevertheless, at least a minimum level of interaction with all armed actors is necessary to advocate for compliance with International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law. There is an urgent need to ensure aid agency staff receives better training and preparation, particularly around International Humanitarian Law and political and military context prior to deployment to volatile countries with complex civilian-military interactions.

RULE OF LAW & THE POLICE

It is important to consider not just the armed forces in these environments, but also the police. There has been a marked increase in the deployment of police as part of UN peacekeeping missions in recent years; the 6,765 officers serving in January 2005 had increased to 13,057 by December 2013. This increase is driven by a need to support the restoration of rule of law in fragile contexts where local police may have been involved in the conflict and pose a real threat to the peacebuilding process. To play a part in safeguarding of law and order and protecting civilians in these contexts, internationally deployed police officers require significant authority and a good knowledge of human rights to gain the trust of the population and operate effectively. For some language can pose a real problem, as well as the more serious issue of officers originating from countries which themselves have a poor human rights record.

Despite these challenges, the police are uniquely placed in the military sector to work much more closely with affected communities than the armed forces and it seems possible that they therefore provide the most potential for effective coordination between humanitarian and military actors. Indeed, Darfur in Sudan offers a positive example. Despite a lack of practical guidelines, from very early on the UNAMID mission police

¹ ICRC (2013) *Professional Standards for Protection Work carried out by humanitarian and human rights actors in armed conflict and other situations of violence*, Switzerland: ICRC

² Jackson, A. & Haysom, S. (2013) 'The search for common ground: civil-military relations in Afghanistan, 2002-13' HPG Working Paper, London: ODI.

³ Ibid (2013)

worked closely alongside humanitarian actors, quickly establishing lines of communication, keeping in daily contact and sharing information and operational reports. Regular consultation between the two enabled successful patrols of firewood collection routes, markets and farming areas to help prevent attacks on civilians, which in turn built a positive relationship between the community and the UN police. Humanitarians and police also worked closely together to support the establishment of security committees in IDP camps and collaborated on training local law enforcement actors in human rights, and gender-based violence.⁴

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

It is of course vital to recognise that every country context is different and has its own specificities and challenges. For this reason, drawing up guidelines for civil-military cooperation must bear in mind the individual context – a one size fits all set of operational guidelines is not the answer. There has at times been a lack of adherence to operational guidelines relating to civil-military interaction but research doesn't seem to answer why this is. It appears as though this is a particular problem in areas where humanitarians are dealing with the combination of natural disaster and conflict. Perhaps this is the case because the current guidance framework for operational-level cooperation does not reflect the increasing complexity of the operating environment – for instance there is no guidance on relations with the host state military, a problem in cases such as Pakistan where the military are both the primary responder to a disaster, and a party to the conflict. Neither is there guidance for how the relationship between the international military and humanitarian actors may change or should function in disaster response situations which also involve ongoing armed conflict or political instability.

It is also important to acknowledge that the humanitarian community itself, being so diverse in its mandates, agendas and levels of professionalism, can be a major challenge to operational coherence and coordination. Additionally, longer term cycles of violence have changed the landscape of aid giving: Protracted conflicts which last a number of years see humanitarian and development actors working side by side with perhaps more overlap in their activities. While this broader agenda requires a holistic approach; it is a job that neither the military nor the humanitarian community can achieve on their own. But, there is a need to ensure that humanitarian actors do not become reliant on logistic resources or support provided by the military.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION

Effective co-operation of civil and military actors is possible as long as both parties acknowledge their different motivations, and their roles are clearly separated and defined from the outset. When security situations deteriorate, even if there is no conflict, the civil-military relationship should be one of coexistence; operating side-by-side, but with no common roles. Revaluations may be necessary as the conflict context evolves, which is why continuing communication is essential.

There is a need for clearer guidelines at strategic and operational level, more clearly defined mandates for civilian and military actors and better communication between the two. Early engagement is important; building relations helps to preserve integrity of humanitarian principles and establishing dialogue makes it easier to continue engaging. Pre-deployment training is also vital, as is the need to share lessons post-event. The Swedish joint training centre for civilian-military exercises – VIKING – offers an opportunity for this early engagement. In a simulated emergency situation it provides practical skills in coordination and cooperation before deployment to countries where a multi-dimensional UN mission is operating. This sort of training is vital to ensure a better understanding of the different institutional mandates and operational procedures of the various sets of actors present in these emergencies.

⁴ Fryer, M. (2013) 'Working it out on the ground: coordination between UNAMID police and humanitarian actors in Darfur', *Humanitarian Exchange* 56: January 2013

The challenge remains a significant one, particularly when we acknowledge that each of these complex humanitarian emergencies have unique characteristics, political backdrops and organisational relationships. They are volatile, often politicised situations where actors from both humanitarian organisations and the military will inevitably find themselves side-by-side, but where it can be difficult to agree on an appropriate level of interaction between the two. Dialogue is therefore an essential part of delivering effective aid in these contexts. There are some existing forums which encourage this sort of dialogue like the British Red Cross NGO military contact group (NMCG). Meeting quarterly to discuss policy, technical and operational issues around civil-military coordination, it brings together professionals from the International Red Cross, the British military, the Ministry of Defence, DFID and the FCO. The New Zealand Council for International Development also runs an annual civil-military forum encouraging discussion between those from the defence, police, government and NGO sector. These types of forums are crucial if we are to generate agreement over issues of responsibility and competence whilst recognising the differences in approaches and crucially, objectives. This means identifying where there is and can be constructive complementarity to the roles of both actors, but also acknowledging where this is not possible. Ultimately we must not lose sight of the fact that humanitarian actors and military forces have different objectives in these situations and as much as is possible, we must retain enough distance from one another to remain true to those objectives.